

"PERLAS NG SILANGAN" AND MINDANAO PEACE

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Relevant to the ongoing peace process in Jolo, Sulu is the re showing by Viva Films in Manila, recently, of the 1968 FPJ Production of "*Perlas ng Silangan*" which stars Fernando Poe, Jr. and Susan Roces. A box office hit and a CMMA (Christian Mass Media Award) film awardee in 1968, "*Perlas ng Silangan*" - written by Fred Navarro, generally depicts Philippine Muslims' heroic struggle against Spain and approximates these people's religious and traditional beliefs and practices.

The year 1968, when "*Perlas ng Silangan*" was first shown was the year when the "Jabidah Massacre" of scores of young Muslim trainees of the AFP happened in Corregidor Island. The film showing had consoling effects on the Muslims who were greatly hurt by that incident.

The ongoing peace process in Jolo is one of the many attempts of the Government and the MNLF to put to an end the Mindanao conflict. Although, the cease fire agreement has brought relative peace in Mindanao, isolated incidents such as the reported kidnappings and massacres could impair the peace efforts being undertaken by the two parties.

With the re-showing of "*Perlas ng Silangan*" in this time of uneasy peace, its positive portrayal of the Muslim's cause helps remedy the imbalance in media reporting on the Mindanao problem which often names the Muslims as the culprits. Actually, the Muslims have been victims of costly mis-readings by their Christian co-citizens who often mistake the causes of the Mindanao Problem with the effects. The mis-education of the Filipinos on the Muslims remains as the most potential cause of the so-called Moro Problem in the Southern Philippines.

While the general effect of the film is the positive projection of the Philippine Muslims, there are many aspects of the production design and theme that are not culturally and historically correct. Newspaper write-ups in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and in **The Philippine STAR** which claimed the film to be "authentic" and a product of "extensive research" are misleading and could not be substantiated.

As the space in this section does not allow a thorough scrutiny of the film details, this writer presents only a generalization of the major errors.

Semiotically, the production design oversimplifies, and in some aspects distorts, the material culture of the Muslims. The designs of costumes, weapons, and cultural tools and containers are generalized and inaccurate in details. In some scenes, forms are incongruent with functions. Some forms used are offensive. The scene that showed two sculptured human head figures posted at the entrance of the Sultan's palace is inappropriate. Such figurative forms are being condemned by Muslim theologians as forms of idolatry. Designs of *kris*, *vinta*, sails, houses, flags and other cultural paraphernalia are mostly out of the Sulu and Mindanao contexts.

The music and dances in the film reflect lack of extensive research. The potential of Muslim traditional musical instruments such as the *gabbang* and the *kulintangan* are not utilized. In the dance, there is excessive stylization of movement and over-sophistication of costumes which tend to be insincere.

The portrayal of Muslim rituals in the film seriously violates basic Islamic and *addat* (customary) beliefs and practices. The praying scene does not portray the standard posture in Muslim praying. Fernando Poe, Jr. and company 'pray' as if they are facing a totem pole or an image of an idol. Excessive and repetitive bowing and hand-raising with face up is not appropriate Muslim praying posture. Susan Roces in royal regalia embellished with jewels and glitters does not portray a Muslim woman in prayer. The scene inside the mosque which shows Fernando Poe and Susan exchanging glances violates the mosque sanctity. Director Pablo should have chosen another setting fitted for that kind of interaction.

The marriage scene is oversimplified. Many essentials of Muslim marriage customs are violated. The scene of the burial practice is dramatic but inaccurate. The wrapping of the corpse exceeds the required form. White cloths, as symbol for mourning are not supposed to be worn but to be hanged as flags or to be arranged in multi-tiered form on bamboo poles. Corpse is not seated nor seen when transferred to the grave. It is lying in a coffin covered with 'special' funeral cloth and placed inside a funeral house called *jampana*.

One of the most misunderstood traditions of the Philippine Muslims is the practice of *juramentado* known locally as *parrang sabil*. The goal of *parrang sabil* is patriotic and not personal. Its targets are foreign enemy combatants and not women, children or the aged. The familiar scene in most Filipino films on Muslims where a bald man is shown brandishing a *kris* and killing anybody along the way is not *juramentado*. It is amuck. Vic Vargas and company in the film "*Perlas ng Silangan*," similar to Vic Diaz in the film "*Zamboanga*," poetry amuck and not

juramentado. They should not have been shown undergoing the ritual of *parrang sabil* which is an insult to the Muslim defenders of freedom in the past.

The theme of "*Perlas ng Silangan*" which centers on Muslim heroism is a welcome development in the history of Philippine movies. But, why does it take a *mestizo* (portrayed by Fernando Poe) to provide the lead in the struggle? This role could be played by a 'true-blooded' Muslim character. However, in the film, the 'true blooded' Muslim character portrayed by Vic Vargas epitomizes undesirable traits and behaviors.

Setting aside all these comments, the film has positive effects serving the interest of Mindanao peace. For the Muslims, they must, still, be grateful to the producers of "*Perlas ng Silangan*" for trying their best to project a generally positive Muslim image in the film. It is hoped that this criticism will encourage them more to work on another project on Muslim theme - something that can be truly called "authentic" and "Muslim." The Muslims in the Philippines have a lot more to offer.-- APS (*The Philippine Star*, January 7, 1994, p. 6)